

Tonto National Forest – Outfitter-Guide Program Changes Recreation and Special Uses Specialist Report

Prepared by: Rachel Franchina and Greg Schuster

Affected Environment

At nearly 3 million acres, the Tonto National Forest (Tonto NF) is the largest national forest in the Southwestern Region and the fifth largest in the country. The forest's size provides a variety of natural settings from saguaro deserts to cool pine forests. Its proximity to the Phoenix metro area means it is one of the most visited national forests in the system, with approximately 4.8 million visitors.¹ The Tonto's primary recreation opportunities and activities are described above in the forest's recreation niche statement below.

There are five other national forests in Arizona: Kaibab, Coconino, Apache-Sitgreaves, Prescott, and Coronado. While each of these forests offers a similar array of recreation opportunities to those on the Tonto NF, there are some distinct differences. For example, the Tonto NF has six large reservoirs that offer opportunities for motorized boating, lake kayaking, and even SCUBA diving. It also has lower elevations that are accessible in the winter months when higher elevation forests are covered in snow.

The analysis area for this project is the entire Tonto National Forest. Under the No Action alternative, the analysis area includes roads, trails and others areas (e.g., river corridors and hunting camps) already authorized for priority outfitter-guide use. Under the Proposed Action alternative, the analysis area includes all national forest system roads and trails and areas (e.g., river corridors and hunting camps) already authorized for priority outfitter-guide use; undesignated (e.g., user-created) roads and trails and areas not already authorized for outfitter-guide use are not part of this analysis.

Recreation Niche

The Tonto National Forest - Spines, Pines, Oasis and Us

Rising from the Sonoran Desert to the cool pine covered slopes of the Rim Country, the Tonto NF is a portal to Arizona's heritage. Lush desert landscapes with refreshing lakes and streams provide an oasis for millions of visitors at the edge of one of the largest cities in the United States. While the forest offers easy access for intensive day use activities, the rugged backcountry areas offer challenge and solitude from primitive roads and trails. The Forest plays a vital role in maintaining healthy ecosystems, which contribute to local quality of life, and to quality recreational experiences.

Settings, Special Places, and Values:

The Tonto NF is the backyard for one of largest and fastest growing areas in America. This forest offers desert solitude and high elevation thermal relief. A year-round forest, the landscape ranges from the legendary Sonoran Desert with its unique flora and fauna to a mixed conifer forest connected by a series of breathtaking drives. Nestled in the canyons and valleys are lakes and reservoirs supporting warm water fisheries and a full range of water-based recreational activities. Prehistoric and historic cultural resources are valuable reminders of the past some of which are easily accessible and are managed within the capability of the natural systems.

¹ National Visitor Use Monitoring, Tonto National Forest, 2008.

- **Front Country** - Oasis next to one of the fastest growing communities in the country.
- **Linear Adventure** - These “corridors of discovery” offer a range of travel routes from remote wilderness trails to paved highways that loop through the forest. They include: National Scenic Byways/state scenic and historic routes, Verde River Wild and Scenic River, the Great Western Trail, Highline and Sixshooter Canyon National Recreation Trails.
- **High Country** - High elevation ponderosa pine and mixed conifer forests provide shade and thermal relief from the desert heat in summer and snow in the winter.
- **Back Country** - Easily accessed yet challenging to traverse mid-elevation areas of the forest including designated wilderness areas.
- **Heritage Gems** – Sears-Kay Ruin and Shoofly Village interpretive sites, remote wilderness cliff dwellings, Perry Mesa and Tonto Basin Hohokam ruins, historic mining districts, and other prehistoric and historic sites.

Activities/Opportunities/Experiences:

The Tonto offers climate-specific activities such as floating the Lower Salt River, or boating on the lakes and rivers to escape the desert heat or by visiting the temperate forested areas at higher elevations. Motorized and non-motorized trail use is popular in the desert during the fall/winter months. Hiking, exploring, viewing, visiting historic and prehistoric sites, dispersed camping, hunting, outfitted and guided activities can all be enjoyed in most areas of the Forest.

- **Front Country** - Short duration, frequent and intensive use levels. Developed camping and water play along lake shorelines and on rivers, warm water fishing, OHV use, shooting, interpretation and education (Primary Visitors: Urban Local) (see table 1).
- **Linear Adventure** - Driving for pleasure, river floating, whitewater rafting, motorized and non-motorized long distance trail uses, and viewing scenery (Primary Visitors: Urban Local, Tourists).
- **High Country** - Developed camping, relaxing, group camping, picnicking, big game hunting, and cold water fishing (Primary Visitors: Rural Local, Urban Local).
- **Back Country** – Hiking, horseback riding, Wilderness experiences, primitive camping, big game and bird hunting, OHV touring on designated routes (Primary Visitor: Urban Local, Rural Local).
- **Heritage Gems** – Visiting prehistoric and historic sites for interpretation and education. (Primary Visitor: Urban Local).

Table 1. Primary Visitors to Forest

Urban Local	From the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas
Rural Local	From the smaller communities within and surrounding the Forest
Tourists	Out of state and international visitors

Recreation Opportunity Spectrum

The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) describes the range of recreation opportunities (activities and settings) across a national forest, from highly developed (urban) to very remote (primitive). The Tonto National Forest is divided into the following ROS classes (table 2).

Table 2. Tonto National Forest Recreation Opportunity Spectrum Classes and Acreages

ROS class	Acres
Urban	31,325
Rural	41,860
Roaded Natural	613,380
Semi-primitive Motorized	994,165
Semi-primitive Non-motorized	1,007,915
Primitive	260,505
Unknown	16,143

Recreation Special Uses

Permits for outfitting and guiding area required for any entity conducting commercial operations on a nation forest. Commercial use is defined as (36 CFR 251.51) “any use or activity on National Forest System lands (a) where an entry or participation fee is charged or (b) where the primary purpose is the sale of a good or service, and, in either case, regardless of whether the use or activity is intended to produce a profit.”

There are currently 14 priority outfitter-guide permits holders on the Tonto National Forest. In addition, there are 45 temporary outfitter-guide permits holders on the forest (see definitions for priority and temporary use in table 3 below).

Table 3. Current priority use activities and service days authorized.

Activities authorized for priority use	Number of priority service days authorized
Horse/Trail rides	2,350
Hiking	300
OHV	3,992
Rafting	7,750
Fishing	90
Other	400
Total priority service days authorized	14,882

In 2008, the Forest Service issued new direction on outfitter-guide permit administration ([Forest Service Handbook 2709.11 Chapter 41.53](#)). This new guidance directs issuance of temporary permits for a maximum of six months with a maximum of 200 service days per permit. Priority permits may be issued for up to 10 years based on the holder’s past use and performance.

Prior to the 2008 direction, institutional outfitters (e.g., schools, non-profit organizations) could not be issued a priority permit. Under the 2008 direction, the institutional category was abolished and any recurring outfitter-guide use is to be permitted through a priority permit.

In some cases, temporary permits on the Tonto National Forest have been issued on an annual basis with more than 200 service days. Prior to the 2008 direction, it was common for new outfitter-guide permits to be issued on a temporary basis and some of these temporary uses were never analyzed through the NEPA process for priority use consideration. These included permits formerly in the institutional category as well as other recurring outfitter-guide uses.

The Tonto National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1985) provides guidance for all resource management activities on the forest. It provides forest specific goals, objectives, and standards and guidelines for management direction. General direction for the outfitter-guide program includes:

- Commercial recreation special use permits may be issued to qualified applicants whose services are available to all members of the public when the proposed use (a) fulfills a demonstrated public need without unduly infringing on the use by the general public, (b) is identified in and is in accordance with an approved implementation plan (where called for), and will not cause the carrying capacity of the involved area to be exceeded, (c) does not serve a function that can logically be provided by private enterprise off National Forest System lands and will provide a type of recreation activity naturally associated with a National Forest, and (d) is complementary to Forest Service and Management Area objectives, programs, and purposes.
- Continue administration of existing recreation special use permits to assure compliance, and to assure that a quality public service is provided consistent with Forest Service and Management Area objectives.
- Use established outfitter/guide allocations contained in the Standards and Guidelines for each Management Area as the basis for all decisions/recommendations (except for the category of "fishing guide" which is unlimited at this time). When unused service days are available, the maximum number of service days per permit may be temporarily increased, so long as the maximum number of permits and total service days per year are not exceeded (this is not allowed with "pool" service days).

Environmental Effects

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action alternative, priority permits would not be issued. Outfitter-guide service day allocations in the Tonto National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended, would remain the same. A Total Service Day pool would not be established.

Direct effects would occur to temporary permit holders that qualify for priority use. There are approximately 40 temporary permit holders eligible for priority use. Priority permits (up to ten years) would be analyzed on a case-by-case basis, but not all temporary permit holders eligible for priority use would receive a priority permit. Some temporary permit holders would not be receive a priority permit because Forest Plan service day allocations for priority use and for the number of permits available in a management area would be exceeded. Some temporary permits would continue to be issued on an annual basis, which would not be in compliance with Forest Service policy for outfitter-guide permit administration. Some temporary permits would no longer be issued because the use exceeds 200 service days and/or the use occurs for more than six months at a time. Visitors who don't have the knowledge, skills or abilities to participate in recreation activities on their own or otherwise need the services of outfitter-guides could have fewer opportunities to hire an authorized outfitter-guide.

Some potential outfitter-guide permittees – both current temporary permit holders and businesses that would like to begin operating on the Tonto NF – may choose to operate without a special use authorization, if they are unable to obtain a priority permit. Unauthorized outfitter-guides are not subject to special use permit requirements designed to minimize impacts to other users and the natural and cultural environments.

Proposed Action Alternative

Current priority permit holders would continue to operate under their special use authorization. Priority (up to ten year) outfitter-guide permits would be issued to existing long-term temporary permit holders that have demonstrated acceptable performance. New priority use would not exceed service day allocations as established in the Total Service Day allocation pool (see table 3, p. 11). New priority permit holders would have increased security in managing their businesses and providing opportunities to people who choose to use their services. However, current priority permit holders could experience increased competition from new priority permit holders. Current and new priority permit holders would be subject to annual performance reviews and could have their permit revoked for unacceptable performance.

Priority permits may also be issued for new uses within the Total Service Day Allocation by activity type and management area. Priority use would only be authorized on existing roads and trails used by outfitter-guides and the general public, and in areas (e.g., river corridors, reservoirs) already authorized for priority outfitter-guide use. Priority use would not be authorized on user-created routes or in areas not already authorized for outfitter-guide use. An increase in particulate matter disturbance from off-highway vehicles or driving on forest roads is not expected to occur, because any new or continued priority use would occur on roads and trails used by the general public.

Non-commercial recreationists would encounter more authorized outfitter-guide permittees. However, there are no documented conflicts between commercial and non-commercial recreation use on the Tonto NF. Outfitter-guide permit holders are subject to special use permit requirements designed to minimize impacts to other users and the natural environment. Issuing priority special use authorizations to qualified outfitter-guides would likely decrease the amount of unauthorized outfitter-guide use. Moreover, authorized permit holders would assist the agency in monitoring resource and social conditions, including unauthorized outfitter-guide use.